

## **Meditation Basics for Yourself and to Help Others**

There are many books and a mountain of scientific articles on meditation and its benefits. This article is a brief overview, and reflects my Buddhist training. Keep in mind however, that many traditions have meditation, including Christian and Jewish.

The word, “meditation” is used for many activities, including contemplation, however, it actually refers to training in mindfulness, or being aware of and accepting all moment-to-moment experience, inner (thoughts, feelings, sensations) and outer (sounds, sights, events). Meditation can also be described as “relaxed focus.”

There are many misconceptions that can lead to discouragement and difficulty in creating an enduring, beneficial meditation practice. People often expect meditation to yield altered states, similar to those of exercise-induced endorphin and enkephalin levels. Some people expect that meditation practice should produce unusual experiences, such as visions or knowing answers unknown before. Although blissful states and extraordinary experiences may occur, in Buddhist meditation they are considered fleeting phenomena that can be enjoyed, but are neither held on to, nor sought after.

Meditation “practice” is just that: sitting day after day, intentionally focusing the mind on a chosen object, letting thoughts and feelings pass without evaluation, and bringing the attention back to the chosen object when it inevitably strays into identifying with a thought or emotion. The willingness to bring the mind back to the chosen focus is mind training that, like repetitions in a gym, gradually diminishes habitual identification with thoughts and feelings and produces the long-term benefits of unconditional happiness and spontaneous compassion.

### **The Benefits of Meditation**

One can hardly pass a newsstand today without seeing at least one article touting new scientific evidence on the benefits of meditation. As with hatha yoga, the lists of benefits sound like a promotion for snake oil. However, these benefits all derive from profound changes in how we habitually use our minds as well as actual anatomical and activity alterations in the brain itself.

Over the last ten years, a group of neuroscientists have met yearly with the Dalai Lama, from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, to discuss findings that either pertain to or result from meditation. For over twenty years, Jon Kabat-Zinn and his group at Massachusetts General Hospital have been teaching mindfulness to people with chronic pain, documenting its effectiveness and training practitioners in its use. These and other research groups within and outside of the US have slowly amassed a large body of work demonstrating meditation’s physical and emotional benefits, and the media have made these results public.

Functional MRI has demonstrated a difference in the brain activity of meditators from non-meditators (the use of this technology for this purpose is

controversial, however). For example, people who are not meditating regularly typically show more activity in the amygdala and left pre-frontal cortex of the brain than meditators. Heightened activity in these parts of the brain results from a perception of threat and results in states of anxiety, fear, distrust or hostility. However, with only 12 weeks of daily meditation practice, even novice meditators show less activity in those parts of the brain, and increased activity in the right pre-frontal cortex that is associated with relaxation and acceptance. Recent anatomical data from an investigator with Kabat-Zinn's group suggest that even novice meditators show an increase in the thickness of the brain's cerebral cortex in the areas of memory, attention and focus, and decision-making. They speculate that meditation may slow the age-related loss of that part of the cortex.

Most regular meditators describe feeling more relaxed—less anxious—and therefore less disturbed by negative thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. The enhanced relaxation and physiologic states that result are the basis for the myriad of physical benefits. Any condition or illness that is caused or exacerbated by stress might conceivably benefit from regular meditation practice. In addition, a group from the University of Toronto has demonstrated a relapse rate of 34% from a baseline of 66% in people with chronic depression who are taught to practice non-judgmental mindfulness of their emotional states and thoughts. Because we habitually “practice” stressful body states and identification with thoughts and feelings, many of which are disturbing, repeated practice in holding concentration on a chosen focus is a very powerful means of training the mind, and this in turn changes the brain.

### **Types of Meditation**

Meditation methods can be divided into two very basic types. “Insight” meditation (“Vipassana” *Sanskrit* or “Laghtong” *Tibetan*,) also called “meditation without support,” refers to meditating with awareness itself as the focus of attention. This method is found only in the Buddhist tradition. “Calm Abiding” (“Shamata” (Skt.) “Shinay” (Tib.) is meditation using a “support,” such as focusing on the breath, body sensations or sounds as they arise, mantra (repetition of words or sounds) or qualities such as devotion, compassion or loving-kindness. All the meditation methods commonly taught in the U.S. in any tradition fall into this general type. Nomenclature can be confusing because the method called “Vipassana” is actually a form of Calm Abiding meditation that has vipassana or insight as its eventual goal. “Shamata” meditation often refers to a specific type of Calm Abiding meditation that uses the breath as its focus, but there are many other Calm Abiding methods as well, perhaps hundreds in the Buddhist tradition alone. The ability to do insight or Laghtong meditation, focusing on awareness itself rather than the “objects of awareness” such as breath or mantra, develops over time from Calm Abiding practice.

Whether articulated to students or not, all meditations have both a “way” which refers to the method itself, and a “goal,” which is the quality or qualities that gradually develop from repeated practice over time. All meditation methods develop concentration and the ability to be aware of things, or “abide” with

feelings, events, or sensations, as they are, without needing to change them. Awareness develops with any method as the practitioner, using relaxed, focused attention, repeatedly recognizes that the mind has strayed and brings it back to the original focus. However, many other qualities can be developed, depending on the method and the motivation of the meditator. Mahayana (Great Way) Buddhist meditations include the promise to benefit all beings, and that motivation gradually erodes egotism and self-centeredness. Meditating with the motivation to benefit all beings also gradually creates a sense of benevolence in the world of the meditator, as we tend to expect what we habitually project. As my teacher puts it, "We can focus on ourselves and have problems, or focus on others and have a lot of exciting things to do."

### **For Care Providers**

Meditation is a powerful force against burnout. Eating disorders are stubborn conditions and recovery can take years. All of us have probably experienced the distress that comes from feeling that unless our client changes, we ourselves have "failed." Meditation gradually trains us to be with things as they are, to do our best to help anyone or any situation within our power, without being attached to the outcome and with discernment about what we can actually affect. This is the quality of "calm abiding" or Shamata.

In addition, neurological research into what are called "mirror neurons" shows that mammals, particularly humans, actually mimic in brain activity the behavior that we witness, not just the behavior we act out. For example, if we see someone cutting with a knife, our brain will mirror the action with similar firing of the neurons in our own brains. It has been shown that our ability to sense a person's emotional state comes from our brain "mirroring" by firing the same neuronal pathways as the state we are witnessing. We even unconsciously mimic the facial expressions and body language of people we see, and thus "catch" their emotional state. Anyone who has worked with clients for a while has had the experience of feeling fine when the client comes into the office, but later feeling angry, sad, etc., for no apparent reason other than listening to and watching the client. Meditation posture, with the spine straight and the body and face relaxed, is itself a potent training in being aware of the shape and expression of our body, and it guards against unconscious mimicry. The enhanced awareness of subtle phenomena developed with meditation practice also enables us to be more likely to recognize when we are identifying too strongly with our clients' experience.

Paul Ekman and his group in San Francisco cataloged the range of human facial expression and proved that it is innate. This means that regardless of what makes a person in the U.S. or a Maori in New Zealand feel disgust, the resulting facial expression will be the same. They found that not only does emotion produce a characteristic facial expression, the facial expression can itself produce the emotion and its physiology. Happy or pleasant facial expressions produce happy states, while sad or angry facial expressions result in unhappy ones. Just holding a pencil in the mouth improves mood by creating a

slightly smile-shaped mouth. Meditation practice is done with a neutral or slightly smiling face, and therefore trains us to avoid unconsciously wearing facial expressions of worry, sorrow or hostility that would create or sustain those feelings in ourselves.

In addition, Ekman's group showed that humans will produce "micro-expressions" for a split second that show their actual feelings before "covering" their true feelings with a more socially acceptable face. Both the true expression and its mask are done unconsciously. The ability to read these micro-expressions is a powerful means of understanding how another person is actually feeling. Experienced meditators, trained in continuously noticing subtle phenomena without judgment, demonstrate particularly acuity in reading these fleeting expressions, while psychologists and police detectives demonstrate no better face reading ability than lay people.

### **For People with Disordered Eating or Eating Disorders**

Although meditation can be a potent "change agent," it is not for everyone. Meditation is deceptively simple. Anyone who has tried to develop a regular practice knows that it is easy to get discouraged and quit. Most traditions provide the support of teachings to provide a frame for meditation, as well as communities of fellow practitioners, practice retreats, and skilled instruction in the method taught and the difficulties that inevitably arise along the way. Using any meditation method enables us to experience all too clearly our habitual thoughts and feelings. Most people who begin meditation practice report feeling that their thoughts and feelings are "getting worse" (i.e. more intense and frequent,) when actually the only real change is that we are more aware of what is and always was there. However, it requires a certain emotional stability to tolerate the recognition of our habitual states. Meditation is contraindicated for people who are severely depressed or vulnerable to psychosis.

For all of these reasons and more, I am very careful about whom I recommend meditation to, and when a client expresses interest, I talk with their psychotherapist before I give instruction. I would be unwilling to recommend meditation had I not practiced myself and found it useful; I think being a helpful meditation teacher or support requires some personal familiarity with the process and obstacles. Without familiarity with meditation, I would perhaps instead refer an intact, interested client to an experienced meditation teacher or to hatha yoga classes that prepare the mind and nervous system for meditation.

That said, meditation practice can be an amazing "intervention" for people with eating disorders. The relaxed, upright posture of meditation itself produces a calmer, more balanced emotional state. Watching the mind, being aware of thoughts, feelings and sensations, and bringing the mind back to a focus when it begins to identify with them, gradually trains us to be a "witness" rather than "victim" of our own states. Gradually over time, we actually recognize that thoughts and feelings are ephemeral, impermanent experiences that come and go like clouds in a breezy, sunny sky. What could be more powerful training for "being present with" the scary sensation of "feeling fat" or too full, or the anxiety,

sorrow or rage that underlies it? Depending on the day, especially in the beginning, a meditator might experience many urges to get up and “do something,” or at least to scratch or fidget. Resisting these urges teaches impulse control, so helpful in non-restrictive and restrictive eating disorders. And many people I have worked with, although certainly not all, harbor an unexpressed hunger for higher meaning and purpose, however they might define it. Meditation offers an opportunity to know our own hearts in an intimate, precise way. This is a marvelous antidote to the emptiness we see in people with eating disorders.

### **How to Begin Meditation Practice**

Everyone is different, but it is usually helpful to have a particular place and time to meditate. We needn't have perfect quiet, but in the beginning, it is good to minimize distractions. Many people and most traditions use an altar, basically a table that holds beautiful or inspiring objects to attract us and help focus the mind. An altar, even if it is not being used, is a visual reminder of the realm of spirit, and it can gently invite us to sit in front of it. Scents like incense create an unconscious memory of previous times of tranquility in meditation and can help evoke that state. We all need a comfortable way to sit. This might be a chair or cushion that enables us to have a straight spine without undue effort. It can take much trial and error to find what works, especially because bodies can be quite “vocal” in their opposition to being trained to sit, with knees, necks and backs the loudest critics. Hatha yoga, practice and compassionate persistence are the best means for working with untrained bodies.

Although each tradition, including each school of Buddhism, teaches differently, I will describe how I was taught and what seems to work best for the people I teach. Many traditions suggest that people meditate for a certain amount of time every day, such as 20 minutes or more twice a day. My tradition teaches “the art of what’s possible,” suggesting that we begin with five or ten minutes a day and gradually increase as we feel the desire. We are advised to stop any session of meditation while we still wish to be doing it, so that it “invites” us back next time. It is suggested that we not force ourselves to sit when we don't want to, avoiding aversive experience. Regular, brief daily meditation sessions gradually produce a habit of sitting. This is not unlike the recommendations for beginning physical activity. Setting a timer for five minutes is a good way of freeing the mind from keeping time.

When I began meditating, it was quickly apparent to me that I needed a teacher to help me break free from my unconscious habits of mind and body, and give me confidence, methods and support in my practice. However, I know and greatly admire a few people who meditate regularly for years without a teacher. Meditation is much harder than learning to play a musical instrument or excel in a sport. If we want to get beyond a certain level, we will probably find it necessary to have a teacher. For most people, finding a teacher is a process of trial and error, being discerning and honest about what we experience both in the teacher and the group they attract. We should choose a teacher who has qualities we

want to develop in ourselves and the group that surrounds him or her should feel like family we are comfortable and at home with. Westerners are notorious in Asia for being gullible, overlooking obvious faults in purported meditation teachers, and we have all heard of scandals involving dishonest teachers and their naïve followers. These unfortunate instances have turned off many intelligent people who might otherwise have benefited from the training and support only a teacher can provide.

Also, unlike in the yoga tradition, where people are taught to “clear the mind of thoughts and feelings” or to “quiet the mind,” in Buddhism, we are taught that thoughts and feelings are the natural products of the body and brain, and that we are to witness rather than “stop” them. We are taught that if there are more thoughts we are observing a more active mind, and if there are less, we watch the mind being quieter. We try to judge or favor neither state, and although we all tend to enjoy a quieter mind, trying to force it just creates tension. We can notice our expectations and preferences and let them pass as well.

I talk to many people who quit meditating because they thought they weren’t “doing it right.” However, any given meditation session can be like training a very young puppy, repeatedly and gently bringing the mind back to the focus, only to watch it veer off again in a moment. For this reason, we are taught to notice our judgments about our meditation as we would any attachment to how we think something should be. The proof of meditation’s long-term benefits, as my teachers have taught me, is when we notice that we are naturally kinder to others and ourselves, and more open to any experience.

Calm abiding meditation on the breath is a simple method to experiment with. Sit with your spine as long as you can, your shoulders and chest broad, eyes either gently closed or slightly open, with your right hand on top of the left. Sitting on a chair is fine if you can sit with your spine straight. Begin to notice your breath, without trying to change it, as it is, coming and going. This is called, “bare attention” noticing your breath and the awareness that perceives it. Some of your attention can be aware without focusing on thoughts, feelings, sensations and sounds, (as you would be aware of yet ignore the tape that runs at the bottom of the CNN news. When you find you are identifying with another phenomenon, bring your attention back to the breath. You might count the breaths, beginning again at one when you bring the mind back. You can imagine the arc of the breath moving from your nose to the floor in front of you, or focus on the sensation of the breath in your nostrils or belly. Be kind to yourself and curious about how your mind is in any given session. You can also begin and end the practice by dedicating any good that results to help all beings. This broadens the scope from benefiting just one to many, and builds the motivation to help others.

I didn’t begin teaching meditation until I saw its results for myself. I can’t think of any other activity that has more potential to help us uncover the joy, fearlessness and compassion that are our natural state. As the Buddha said, we can either try to cover the world with leather to minimize our disturbance, or, through meditation, we can gradually put on a pair of shoes.

**Gretchen Rose Newmark, MA, RD, LD** is a dietitian in private practice specializing in eating disorders in N.E. Portland. She teaches meditation individually and to groups, and has taught hatha yoga. She is also a Spiritual Director, a kind of counseling that focuses on people's religious or spiritual lives.